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A Gathering of 'Merchants of Death'

It was Sept. 23, 1976. Four men gathered secretly in a private home in the Ugandan capital of Kampala.

Outside, the reign of terror launched by Uganda's bloodthirsty dictator, Idi Amin, was in full motion. Inside the house, the talk was of Amin's dreaded secret police and of international terrorist activities.

The four men were among the world's most cold-blooded, dangerous architects of political murder and mayhem. A single grenade tossed into their conference room could have spared the world much pain and misery in the years to come. But there was no one there to turn the tables on the four professional assassins.

Robert Astles, in whose home the dialogue of death was conducted, was Amin's British-born security adviser and general factotum. In his role as Idi Amin's lingo, Astles was allegedly the brains behind the security police, who butchered and tortured thousands of Ugandans during Amin's despotic rule. After Amin and Astles fled Uganda in 1979, the Briton was brought back in chains to face charges of murder. But in September 1976, he was still riding high.

Another participant was Wadi Haddad, known to some of his enemies as the "doctor of death" for his organizing of the 1972 Munich massacre of Israeli Olympic athletes. Less than three months earlier, the Israelis had

thwarted Haddad's hijacking of a jetliner by their daring raid on Entebbe, the airport outside Kampala. After many hairbreadth escapes — including an Israeli bazooka blast into his hotel suite — Haddad died in bed of natural causes in 1978.

The third man was the infamous Venezuela-born assassin, Carlos the Jackal. He was also a planner of the Munich massacre and was responsible for the kidnapping of the OPEC oil ministers in December 1975, as well as many other acts of international brigandage.

The fourth man in this gathering of professional cutthroats was an American, Frank Terpil. A newcomer to the inner circle of international terrorism, Terpil had arrived in Uganda with the personal recommendation of Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi. As a CIA courier some years before, Terpil had ingratiated himself with Qaddafi when the future dictator was a junior officer in the Libyan army and revolution was burning in his head.

Of the four, Terpil probably best fit the description "merchant of death." Not one to risk his own neck, he supplied explosives and other items that enabled hit men to carry out their acts of terrorism around the world. He fled the United States last fall to avoid prosecution for illegal shipment of arms to Libya. At last report, he had registered in the Wienerhaus hotel in Beirut.

Intelligence sources told my associate Dale Van Atta that the Sept. 23 meeting was Terpil's introduction to Amin's inner circle. With his macabre references from Qaddafi, Terpil signed his first contract with Amin in 1977. It was for \$3.2 million worth of weapons and communications gear.

Terpil began providing Astles' security police with torture equipment, taser (electronic shock) guns and other deadly hardware. (One of Terpil's associates was to boast later about a torture he devised that required no sophisticated equipment. It consisted of a rat placed on a victim's stomach under an inverted pot, requiring the rat to gnaw its way through the man's stomach.)

Terpil's first lucrative contract with Idi Amin was followed by several more before the tyrant was finally driven from power. In fact, the American's shipments of weapons and torture devices to Amin were so well concealed that a Ugandan diplomat to the United Nations after Amin's fall told federal investigators he was "appalled that a U.S. citizen could conduct the activities that Mr. Terpil had conducted."

The diplomat and others indicated their belief that Terpil's nefarious trade could easily have been stopped at any time by his former employer, the CIA.